

[Thomas C. Camak]

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Project #1655

W. W. Dixon

Winnsboro, S. C. 6/28/38 trans 390577 FAIRFIELD COUNTY THOMAS C. CAMAK

(white) 83 YEARS OLD.

Thomas C. Camak, widely known as a contributor of news items to the Fairfield [News and & Herald?] of Winnsboro, S. C., lives in a two-story frame house on his plantation twelve miles south of Winnsboro, S. C. His daughter-in-law, Mrs. T. C. Camak, Jr., and her two children live in the home with him and his wife. At the advanced age of 83, he is still active and a member of the County Equalization Board of Property, in Fairfield County.

"I am up here this morning attending, with a few other feeble-minded men, a meeting of the Fairfield County Board of Equalization. It's a curious thing the way people return property for taxation. For instance, two highly respected citizens live on adjoining lands that produce about the same crops per acre. One will return his property in value at seven dollars per acre, his house at five hundred dollars, making mention of two outhouses at one hundred dollars each, four mules at fifty dollars each, etc. The other citizen will return his lands at three hundred dollars per acre, his residence at two hundred dollars, making no mention of outhouses, and return his mules at twenty-five dollars a head. It's strange the first man doesn't take exception to the prejudicial return of his neighbor, but he never does. The only fair way, it seems to me, is to have property returned at its full and just valuation.

"Again it is strange that all the boards I serve on are alive 2 with interest in seeing that the real property of railroad, factories, and other corporations are assessed pretty high in order to bring in sufficient revenue to run our schools and pay the bulk of the cost of our expensive county government systems.

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"I was born about ten miles east of Winnsboro in the Lebannon section of the county, just after a red rooster crowed three times in the nighttime, on May 11, 1855. It is reported that I came here into this world squalling and demanding nourishment and the favor of the superfine sex. In my old age, I have changed very little about the nourishment and the favor of the women of my household.

"My father was David Y. Camak; my mother, Jane Robinson Camak, Scotch-Irish on both sides of the parental house. My ancestors came from Ireland to this country, about the year 1765, and settled on Crooked Run Creek in Fairfield District, Craven District then.

"The first school I attended? Let me see! I walked four miles to a one-teacher school; first, to a Miss Helen Puit and then to a Mrs. S. B. Simmons, who taught in the same school. The building was known as the Cornwallis House, from the fact that Lord Cornwallis spent a day and a night there during the Revolutionary War. Is it still standing? No, the Yankees burned it, but on it now stands the parsonage of Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church in the Greenbriar section. It was a tuition school. My father paid ten cents a day for my schooling then. I attended five days a week, and I stayed all day. For my dinner, I carried a bottle of molasses, two buttered biscuits, and one biscuit with a streak of lean and a streak of fat bacon between it. We began in the old blue-back speller. As we progressed, we got into Robertson's arithmetic and used slates and slate pencils. I forget the history book, but there was a funny way the teacher taught geography. We 3 sang it to the tune of Old Dan Tucker. The whole school enjoyed this method of learning geography. All the boys and girls who went to this school with me are dead and gone. The last one to depart was Thomas Woodward Ruff. I can't remember how many boys there were, but I remember counting the girls every night after I went to bed. The number was exactly twenty-two. There was only one other boy, besides myself, that was big enough to court them, and we sure did our best. The influence of these girls, which was good, made me study hard at night and slick up my hair a little before going to school in the morning. I pause here, like Brutus in his address to the Romans, to ask you if you think the large school plants with

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the excellent equipment of today are turning out as worthy products as the old field of the sixties and seventies?

“What about the period of great hostilities between the North and South? Looking over church statistics, it is shameful that secession and war ever came about. Here was a young nation, not as old as I am today, founded on the principles of Jesus, patience, forbearance, long suffering, liberty, tolerance, and a declaration that all men are born free and equal. Why could not the sermon on the mount have been heeded? That would have provided for just recognition of what the South had done for the Negro race, a time to be set for their emancipation, and compensation to the individual slave owner for the property valuation of the slave. The Christian citizenship of our country lost a great opportunity when it did not stand between the Pharisaical traders and manufacturers of the North and the arrogant and proud land owners and slaveholders of the South and settle the question without bloodshed and on some social and economic policy fair to the Negro and not injurious to the southern white people.

“Well, at the end of the war, Sherman's army came thru our section 4 raiding and burning. When they got to our house, they herded up all cows and sheep, put halters on the mules we had, made the Negroes catch our chickens - all except an old red rooster that got away under the barn - ransacked the smokehouse, and, for pure meanness, emptied a tub of lye soap into our molasses hogshead. After they left us and marched on to Winnsboro, it was a long time before we saw an egg again and the old red rooster was very lonely; in fact, he didn't strut any more.

“We didn't have any coffee for a long time after the war. We used as a substitute, that winter, parched ground rye; in the fall, ground okra seed. Mother made our clothes; spun the thread on the old spinning wheel after the cotton had been carded into bats by the Negro women on the place. She could weave the cloth necessary to clothe the family. We took strips of bark from live walnut trees to dye the cloth.

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"Yes, I remember the old wire hoop she wore to bulge out the skirt. Later, the hoop was discarded and bustles became the rage and fashion. This looked like a head rest, but was tied on too far down the back to do the woman's head any good, I think.

"One of the great diversions in my young manhood was horseback riding with girls. You couldn't carry the getting-up, mount block along with you into the woods, when you were in quest of wild strawberries, whortleberries or wild flowers; so, when the quest was over, the great problem was not one of depression but one of elevation of the girl to her seat upon the horse. It never happened to me, of course, but sometimes a nervous boy would find difficulty in finding the proper foot of the young lady in the labyrinth of furbelows, petticoats, balmorals and riding skirts. Then he must have a good play of the wrist muscles to allow for any eccentricity of the girl's ankle; for it might turn under excitement of the 5 movement, slip out of the boy's hand, and by force of gravity descend to the ground. Now there is a law in physics that when a downward pressure of this kind is removed and the upward pressure is not instantly withdrawn, the resultant effect might be one of personal confusion and embarrassment.

"Yes, I recall the corset. The smaller a woman's waist, in those days, the more attractive she was. It ought to have been condemned and outlawed. I have often seen a girl or women faint at a dance or picnic, due, in my judgment, to tight lacing.

"How about the Sabbath day observance now and in my young days? Well, I was brought up a strict Sabbatarian. We got up, went to family prayers in the dining room, ate breakfast without the usual levity and talk about personal affairs, had our boots and shoes blacked, dressed, and the whole family attended church. Nothing but sacred music was played or sung in the house that day, not even our favorites.

"While I like baseball, I shudder every time I read of a game being played on Sunday, visualizing the gate money, betting, coca-cola stands, peanut venders, loud speakers, and so forth.

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"I told my wife, who is just 80 years old, that if she ever played golf with Miss Hemphill and expected me to witness her triumph, she must pull it off some other day besides Sunday.

"Woman suffrage? I thought once that was the panacea for all our ills and woes, but, alas, I see very little change, except the women have become a little more masculine and the men a little lazier. Some of the byproducts are high school girls smoking cigarets on school busses, and Mrs. Smith attending a rally at the Jefferson Hotel, which required Mr. Smith (I suppose) to remain at home and attend to the baby.

"In some homes in those good old days, we were allowed to dance the 6 quadrille and the Virginia reel, but in most homes, under the saintly power of the preacher, it was prohibited. There was no round dancing in our section in my youth. Indeed, we boys were so unsophisticated, in our neck of the woods, had one of us got his arms around one of the twenty-two girls I spoke of, he would have stalled like a mule or carried her bodily to the Methodist parsonage and got married through shame and remorse.

"What did we do for entertainment at the other houses where dancing was forbidden? O, we played 'Thimble,' told fortunes, played 'Old Maid,' 'Little Sallie Walker,' and 'Heavy, Heavy, Hangs Over Head.'

"I know very little about the military government in South Carolina. And I have no knowledge of the Ku Klux Klan. When I became a man, I put away childish things, joined the Greenbriar Club, in 1876, wore the red shirt of those days, and obeyed the orders of Major Woodward, the leader. Where he got them we never knew nor asked any questions, but the Major presented the club, in July 1876, with three hundred muskets and plenty of ammunition to fire them. Each member took a musket and some powder and balls and a box of caps home with him.

"One night I was at the Methodist parsonage when a courier, Tom Smith, came and notified me to come with my shooting iron to McKinstry's Hill, where the Greenbriar

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Club was to be assembled. I got my horse and musket and met them. We were led to a schoolhouse by Major Woodward. When we arrived, it was estimated that there were 5,000 Negroes outside and inside the schoolhouse. A bright mulatto from Connecticut, I. B. Smith, was speaking. Major Woodward pushed thru the crowd into the schoolhouse and I squeezed in behind him. Some discourteous reference to the Major was made by the speaker. The Major advanced and knocked Smith down and broke up the meeting.

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"That winter our Greenbriar Club went to Columbia. Fairfield had two Negro members in the Republican Mackey House of Representatives, John Gibson and Dan Byrd. John Gibson lived ten miles from Winnsboro; Dan Byrd in my section, Mossy Dale. We got John and Dan to leave the Mackey House and come over to the Wallace House of Representatives. We contributed that much to the strengthening of the Wallace House and to the undermining of the Mackey House.

"Dan lived to an old age and was a privileged character among the white people of Fairfield. After John's term expired in the legislature, he opened up a shoe repair shop in Columbia, S. C., where he enjoyed a large patronage from white people who know his history." Sage of Mossy Dale Passes His Eighty-Third Milestone

Four Score & Three Winters Have Failed To Dim Wit & Humor Of T.C. Camak, Veteran Correspondent For News & Herald. Celebrates Birthday At Home. T. C. CAMAK ("Mossey Dale") On 83rd BIRTHDAY